

Lakers' Lamar Odom gives a lot and they ask for more

Fans and critics have high expectations, wanting more production, consistency and dominance from him. He will be asked to come off the bench to defend Orlando's Rashard Lewis in the Finals.

By Broderick Turner

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Basketball critics and Lakers fans always want more from Lamar Odom.

They want more production, consistency, dominance -- just more, more, more.

And Odom, he just wants to play his game, the best way he knows how.

Odom is back in the NBA Finals with the Lakers, who play the Orlando Magic in Game 1 on Thursday night at Staples Center, and many still want more out of Odom because he's seen as a nightmare matchup for the Magic.

"They expect more, they want more from Lamar," said Lakers Hall of Famer Magic Johnson, who also is an NBA analyst for ESPN and a minority owner of the Lakers. "When people look at Lamar, they see so much more in him. They see all that talent he has there and they are begging for more. That's a good thing."

Odom is a mild-mannered person, one who eases through life, a player who many teammates say has the biggest heart.

"Lamar is probably one of the nicest guys in the league," Johnson said. "Guys like him don't come around much. That's what I love about him."

When he was asked after practice Tuesday about people's expectations of more from him, Odom smiled and shrugged.

"It's motivation," Odom said. "It's a compliment at the end of the day. People like the way that I play. They want to see it at a high level all the time because it's enjoyable to them."

Johnson said it was a joy to see Odom perform so well in Games 5 and 6 in the Western Conference finals against the Denver Nuggets.

In those two games, Odom averaged 19.5 points, 11 rebounds and shot 51.8% in 32 minutes.

"We saw the real Lamar Odom in the last two games," Johnson said. "He is a matchup problem in this championship series, because they don't have anyone that can match up with him."

There it is again, Johnson, like so many others, expecting and wanting more from Odom.

Odom will be asked to come off the bench to defend Rashard Lewis, Orlando's 6-foot-10 power forward who makes a living on the outside.

Many say the 6-10 Odom is more equipped to handle Lewis because of his size, quickness and versatility.

"The biggest matchup is the Magic versus the Lakers," Odom said. "But you have matchups that you want to work in your favor. For us, that's one of them, me versus Rashard. I've been watching a lot of film on him."

Odom has had a bruised back since Game 4 of the Western Conference semifinals against Houston but has played through his pain.

He's in the final year of a contract that is on the Lakers' books for \$14.1 million. The Lakers might be forced to choose between Odom and Trevor Ariza, who will also be a free agent, this off-season.

First, though, Odom and the Lakers have to go to work to win the NBA championship, to make amends for losing to the Boston Celtics in the Finals last year.

How much does Odom want that title this year?

"As bad as most people want to get to heaven," Odom said, smiling. "As bad as most people want to go to paradise."

Jackson's health

Lakers Coach Phil Jackson developed swelling in his legs that forced him to miss one regular-season game and he's still having tests on his legs and will continue to be examined after the season is over.

"But as of now, I'm feeling pretty good," Jackson said.

Jackson, who has had two hip-replacement surgeries, has one year left on his contract that will pay him \$12 million next season. His health will be a factor in his return, which Jackson figures to do next season.

"I don't think he views his career as over now," Lakers assistant coach Kurt Rambis said. "It always comes down to health for him now."

Quiet time

Want to know how serious Jackson is about winning the championship?

Listen to Andrew Bynum explain why he doesn't return phone calls.

"Coach Phil Jackson told us to turn our cellphones off for the next two weeks and not to talk to anybody," Bynum said, referring to how long the Magic series could last if it goes seven games.

During the regular season, when the Lakers play the Magic in Orlando, they always stay in a hotel downtown. However, for the Finals, Jackson plans to have the Lakers stay in a hotel miles away from downtown to limit distractions.

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Him again

Shaquille O'Neal is not playing in the NBA Finals, but his name keeps being mentioned.

Kobe Bryant has won three NBA championships, but none of them without O'Neal as a teammate. O'Neal, now playing for the Phoenix Suns, won a championship with the Miami Heat in 2006.

Even though Bryant has bristled at the subject, his teammates were asked how much he wants to win an NBA title as the lead man.

"I don't think it's a personal thing," Pau Gasol said. "I think he sees it as a great opportunity to get it done with a great team with the group of guys that we do have here and the guys we have that have been getting it done all year long."

O'Neal played for the Magic and was on the last Orlando team to reach the NBA Finals in 1995, losing to Houston.

O'Neal has dubbed himself "Superman," as has Orlando center Dwight Howard.

"I don't think since Shaq came in the league [16] years ago that we've seen a player this dominant power-wise," Jackson said of Howard.

Bynum vs. Howard

Bynum's matchup against Howard will be another key for the Lakers.

Bynum had five fouls in the first regular-season game against Howard and scored only three points. Bynum had 14 points in the second game against Howard.

"You got to play him straight up," Bynum said. "You got to be able to go against him. If he beats you down the court, you're done. You got to run and get down the court before him so you can start holding him up at the free-throw line."

Times staff writer Mark Medina contributed to this report.

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